Educational Performance and Career Aspirations of Socio- Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) of Students: A Study of Private Secondary Schools in Delhi

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

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DECLARATION BY THE SCHOLAR

I hereby declare that the short synopsis entitled "**Educational Performance and Career Aspirations of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) of Students: A Study of Private Secondary Schools in Delhi**" being submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Education and Humanities under the School of Education and Humanities of Manav Rachna University, Faridabad during the academic year 2025-26.

It is the work that is expected to be carried out under the supervision of Dr Eram Aziz.

Further, it is declared that the short synopsis is within the plagiarism limit and copy of the same is attached as per the University norms.

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CERTIFICATE BY SUPERVISOR

This is to certify that, the short synopsis entitled Educational Performance and Career Aspirations of Socio- Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) of Students: A Study of Private Secondary Schools in Delhi is an original piece of work done by research scholar Abhishek Mehra under the supervision of Dr Eram Aziz for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Education and Humanities under the School of Education and Humanities of Manav Rachna University, Faridabad during the academic year 2025-26.

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ABSTRACT

The current proposed study explores how high school students in socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (SEDGs) - Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC) and the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) students in Delhi perform academically and participate in career choices and options. The education outcomes and post-school aspirations of these groups still have disparities in their outcomes and in their post-school aspirations despite there being policy interventions such as the Right to Education (RTE) Act, and National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which intend to include these groups. Based on official definitions of EWS and disadvantaged groups (Government of India), and locating the study within the framework of NEP 2020 requirements of equitable schooling, this synopsis presents a qualitative and multiple-case study approach. Case sites are going to be five of the private schools (one per administrative zone of Delhi) and the sampled students are going to be approximated to sample 5 students of the EWS/SC/ST/OBC categories in each school. Interviews, focus group discussions, and analysis of the academic records will be used to collect data to compare the level of performance and career goals among these groups. The research will examine the intersection of socio-economic status and social identity (caste/community) to determine the ability of the students in school to achieve and aspire and will assess the success of existing educational policies in alleviating the same. It is anticipated that the results of the research will provide information about the difficulties encountered by EWS and marginalized students within the elite school setting, the variation (or lack thereof) in their academic performance and professional paths, and how the policy and practice can be more inclusive and equitable to empower more students to receive access to quality education. Fieldwork and analysis have a timeline and detailed plan that would expect completion of data collection and analysis in 18-24 months.

Keywords: Education Inequality; Economically Weaker Section (EWS); Scheduled Castes; Career Aspirations; Inclusive Education; Delhi Schools; Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)

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Introduction

The issue of educational inequality is urgent in the Indian school system, especially among the representatives of the historically disadvantaged groups and poor. Affirmative action and protection of disadvantaged groups have been put in place by the Constitution of India and the laws which have followed it, but there are still huge disparities in educational access and outcomes between disadvantaged groups and others. In secondary school, national surveys have recorded that students with SC/ST background of national and low-income families are likely to achieve poor attendance and dropout rates at the high school level than their more privileged counterparts. An intricate combination of socio-economic and cultural imbalances and resource disparities is often considered to be the cause of these disparities. The capital city of India as Delhi exemplifies this complexity: it makes no secret of the fact that among the best schools in the country, children of slum population, low-income families, and underprivileged castes frequently have a hard time in getting there or even achieving the outcomes.

Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs): In the Indian policy system, Economically Weaker Section is an category of people in non-reserved communities who have low income and asset level (such as below 8 lakh per annum in the central government) and are thus afforded special consideration including the 10% EWS quota in education and government jobs. Within the school education context, the school education act of 2009 has categorized a child of a weaker section as a child whose parents or guardians have an income below the minimum income threshold established by the government. In comparison, the Socially Disadvantaged Groups can be defined as the communities historically socially marginalized. The major categories under this category are Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) - lists of certain castes and tribes in the Constitution (Articles 341 and 342) on which protective provisions must be provided - and Other Backward Classes (OBC), a constitutionally identified group of socially and educationally disadvantaged communities to be identified since the Mandal Commission reforms. RTE Act spells out clearly who is considered a child in a disadvantaged group and it covers a child who is a member of the SC, ST or any other community that the concerned government anticipates as being socially and educationally backward and children with disabilities. In this instance, then such students as those of SC, ST and OBC origin will fall under the category of socially disadvantaged groups according to the national definitions. These divisions are mixed in education system of Delhi where the 25 percent quota is provided at entry-level grades in the private schools, a quota that

is based on EWS (on the basis of income) or the Disadvantaged Group (DG) (on the basis of caste or other disadvantages, such as disability or orphanhood).

Policy Background (RTE Act and NEP 2020): The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 (RTE) was another step forward in the legislature that formally made education a right between the ages of 6-14 years and also offered particular measures on inclusion. The RTE Act (12(1) c) obliges all unaided private schools (except minorities) to provide places at the entry level to the children of EWS, and the disadvantaged sections however, the government bears the entries. Such policy has already been implemented at Delhi; before RTE Act, there existed a 2004. It is due to the sequence of the High Courts that made the 25% of students in EWS to be taken by the private schools which were situated in government-provided land. Since 2010, many students are being enrolled to the private schools based on this scheme. Nevertheless, this does not mean that things are over as, in fact, each year a very large number of the reserved seats in Delhi are left empty (around 20-30 percent of the EWS seats each year, as per the latest press reports, are being left unfilled due to administrative barriers, lack of awareness, or unwillingness of some schools to participate). Moreover, innumerable instances in Delhi have reflected how the EWS/DG students have the hardships of fitting into the private school setup, not only because they cannot afford uniforms and books but also because of discrimination by other students or even teachers.

The law assuring the obligation to equitable and inclusive education was passed in 2020 in India in the new National Education Policy (NEP 2020). NEP puts SC, ST, OBC, minorities, girls, differently-abled, and economically disadvantaged learners under the category Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and recommends specific policies that should be taken to benefit the learners. It supports all the existing policies regarding the reservations to SC/ST/OBC, as well as to the vision of more actions in order to approach the under-represented groups in school education. As an example, NEP 2020 suggests establishing Special Education Zones in areas with high concentrations of SEDGs and proposes such initiatives as a Gender-Inclusion Fund and scholarships to promote student retention and progression of disadvantaged students. Essentially, the existing policy appreciates that there is need to go beyond access to quality and equity in school experience among the disadvantaged learners such as facilitating their achievement in education and career readiness just like others.

Research Problem: With these policy provisions in place, there has been lack of scholarly research on the performance of students in socio-economically disadvantaged groups in Delhi

at the high-school level, and how their future prospects are being framed when compared to students who are more privileged. High school (at around about 14-18, in India, 9-12 in classes) is a pivotal era, in which student academic paths are solidified, and higher education or vocational decisions of higher education or careers start to be determined. The experiences of EWS and disadvantaged-group students in class 10 and 12 board examinations can be crucial to understand at this point due to the following reasons: (1) Academic performance during class 10 and 12 board examinations is often used to determine access to higher education and careers, and therefore, any gap in achievement will be translated into lifelong inequality. (2) Adolescent career aspirations affect the courses and occupations that students take up; low career aspirations or limited goals may recycle the chain of poor achievement or labour division. (3) Delhi provides a special environment of some of the best schools in the country (public and private) and a competitive job market - an environment, which, with proper support, will enable the disadvantaged youth to climb the social ladder or, in the absence of it, will make societal-class differences even more pronounced. The initial observations and press articles indicate the ambivalent situation. On the one hand, success stories of the EWS students that perform at the highest ranks within the private schools demonstrate that given the proper conditions and assistance, the students with disadvantaged background could perform equally with the rest. Conversely, research and reports also reveal that such students usually experience isolation or stigmatization (between two worlds) as well as fail to take advantage of the opportunities as they are socio-culturally isolated and not under guidance. Research that is systematic in terms of comparing educational outcomes and aspirations between SEDGs students and their group peers is needed to determine which factors facilitate or decrease their success.

Against the above, the present Ph.D. study will involve a study of high school students, who are categorized as socio-economically disadvantaged, in relation to their education performance and career goals. The educational performance is going to be assessed in terms of the recent examination achievement, the class rank/grades, the teacher reports, whereas the career aspiration is going to be tested in terms of the expressed ambitions of the students (the choice of preferred careers, higher education intentions, etc.) and the degrees of their extent/levels..

Literature Review

Academic Achievement of underprivileged students:

There is a sufficient literature that demonstrates the influence of social-economic status (SES) and social identity (caste/ethnicity) on educational achievement. Low-SES students in different parts of the world are less likely to achieve education due to numerous factors, including limited educational resources and low elementary preparation. In India, caste-based disadvantage prevails over the class-based disadvantage posing special challenges. John et al. (2020) have performed a quantitative study of Indian adolescents and have discovered that governmentally assigned social category of the students was a strong predictor of academic success in comparison with family income. In 858 tenth and eleventh-graders they sampled, students in the SC/ST groups were found to have lower averages on exams compared to OBCs, who, in turn, were lower than the students in the General (unreserved) group. Interestingly, the income disparities did not completely account for the gap between the performance of the lower and higher caste students, indicating that there exist non-economic determinants of poor academic performance, which may include social discrimination, stereotype threat, or disparity in cultural capital, that are negatively associated with the academic performance of lower-casting students. This result is consistent with decades of research on how the history of caste oppression may be converted into decreased confidence, teacher biases, and academic support of SC/ST students.

The Delhi context has also revealed that the students who are admitted to the school under EWS/DG quota, in the private school, tend to have a learning disadvantage as compared to their counterparts who are in the high income bracket due to the dramatic disparity in their exposure during the early stages of learning. A survey of EWS students in non-government schools performed by Mohanty et al. (2018) (Delhi SCERT) on students of higher grades showed that a significant proportion of such students either failed academically or experienced a decline in performance; it was partly because most were first-generation learners, so their base skills were lower, and partly because parents, who are often working, offered them less academic support at home (a claim that differs in schools where most students are not on the EWS).

According to a qualitative study by Poddar et al. (2020) about inclusion of EWS in a private school in Delhi, EWS students were usually left on the margin of classroom interactions and networks. They were even afraid of posing questions or seeking assistance because they were afraid of being judged because of the background. These barriers of invisibility in a supposedly integrated classroom may result in decreased academic activity. In fact, the RTE Cell and CSD status report (2022) indicated that in certain privates, teachers explicitly target EWS students without any intention of doing so - e.g., by shouting in front of the students that they are in the weaker section, which causes them discomfort. The report indicated that students of EWS who receive their education under RTE frequently find themselves falling in between two worlds, no longer fitting within their own low-income communities but not fitting into the school culture of wealth, a factor that demeans their academic achievement.

Literature, in a nutshell, indicates that there is a two-sided story: first structural disadvantages (poverty, parental education, previous levels of schooling, etc.) lead to poorer academic results at the beginning of EWS and marginalized students. School factors, on the other hand, such as quality of instruction, inclusivity of environment, play a central role in either bridging those initial gaps or increasing them. The achievement gap can be broken, and increased average performance in inclusive environments and success stories of individual students demonstrate that achieving this is not an unchanging factor. This research will expand on such literature by providing current, Delhi-specific data on the existence of academic performance differentials (or otherwise) between students of EWS/DG, and others in the same schools, as well as by qualitatively investigating the causes of such differentials.

Career Aspirations and Expectations:

It is known that the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of the young people determine the vocational aspirations of these individuals. Teenagers who are born into wealthy families normally will have wider exposure to other fields of occupation, good role models in high-profile careers, and a heightened sense of self-efficacy to seek out the best or unconventional career path. On the other hand, individuals who are born in disadvantaged groups are likely to be drawn into more familiar or readily available employment opportunities, and this is often because of the lack of exposure or because the person is in dire need of some financial support. However, aspirations are quite subjective and can do not follow the prevailing trends, which makes it an influential field to study. The studies on career ambitions of various social classes

in India are rather scarce, but numerous researches have revealed the most crucial dynamics of the process. Nisad and Fatima (2017) examined the aspirations of the rural youth and found out that this group of individuals largely exhibits an increased level of career ambition and that many of them hold dreams of working in the engineering, medicine, or civil services profession regardless of their socio-economic status. They did find a significant positive correlation between academic performance and the level of career ambition: the higher the academic performance, the higher the career ambition, and the contrary. This implies that any academic difficulties that EWS/SC-ST students encounter might indirectly prevent their desires therefore, continuing a vicious cycle. Conversely, a successful academic life may boost the ambitions of a person- a fact that should be examined further among the EWS/DG students performing better. One of the studies concerned with social identity and aspirations of Ajayi et al. (2019) contributes to the current discussion.

As it has been reported in Contemporary Education Dialogue, Dalit (SC) students in urban India tend to experience a conflict between expectation and aspiration. They can have high-status ambitions (to become a doctor, an IAS officer, etc.) at the same rate as others given encouragement, but they are checked by the consciousness of obstacles (discrimination, financial barriers, fewer connections) and greater expectations (what they have realistically in their mind with what will happen to them) are lowered. This existent discrepancy between aspiration and expectation may result in aspirational frustration or premature career decision-making.

Delhi is a city with different opportunities, and, therefore, it would be expected that relatively high aspirations of all students, both EWS and disadvantaged students, should exist due to the influence of cosmopolitan, as well as, governmental or NGO career guidance practice programs. However, as we have indications, the ambitions of these students may be even more limited..

Alternatively, Saini and Meenakshi (2024) in a recent interview of senior secondary students students reported much better career aspirations than those of the students in rural areas. Students with low-SES in urban areas tend to have big dreams but do not know how to follow the route to such professions. Among EWS and SC/ST students of private schools, the presence in an academically competitive environment may boost their aspirations - e.g. they may newly desire to pursue the career discussed by their classmates (IT, entrepreneurship, etc.) - or the opposite of that, they may feel scared to pursue something similar because of the perceived

benefits of their peers in terms of resource allocation. This is a complicated interaction that requires qualitative investigation.

Impacts of the School Environment and Policy:

One important theme that comes out in literature is the importance of the school environment in mediating the academic performance as well as pursuing goals among the disadvantaged students. Inclusive policies can make the school door open, and inclusion in the classroom is another process. Cases of prejudice have been presented in studies of social institutions and education scholars in Delhi: according to The Federal (2023), a majority of teachers at private schools keep targeting (economically) weaker students and that labeling them puts them into a sort of silent zone, where they feel they are distinguished. This thin-sliced exclusion may reduce the participation and engagement of a student in classes, which directly influences the conduct of learning and may even weaken their interests in their grand plans of the future. On the other hand, positive attitude of teachers, as well as peer acceptance, has been found to enhance self-esteem of EWS/DG students so that they can prosper.

There has been evidence of mixed outcomes of the RTE 25% quota enforcement, policy-wise. On the one hand, it has brought more diversity to the classrooms and provided tens of thousands of poor children with opportunities to get access to better education. Latent demand and potential is proven by the surge in the numbers of EWS students joining other states such as Delhi - approximately 50,000 places in EWS/DG states are available to EWS students in 2018-19. But compliance problems (empty seats, schools trying to find ways of discouraging applicants, slow handling of fee reimbursements) have been undermining its potential. The literature implies that in those places where the quota is efficiently applied, there are significant academic benefits to the beneficiaries (as has been stated previously), but in those places where the applications are made half-heartedly, the physical inclusion is also not sufficient to produce the desired results. Rampal (2022) is of the opinion that integrating under RTE has to be supported by pedagogical inclusion - curriculum and teaching approaches that are sensitive of first-generation learners - and not merely physical placement in the classroom.

Such research findings influence proposals in NEP 2020 including special training of teachers in inclusive education and special bridging courses of SEDGs. The result of this study will therefore lie in the background of assessing the present policy practices in the schools in Delhi: e.g. whether the schools are offering EWS/DG students additional academic resources (as

demanded in the RTE regulation provision of free textbooks, uniforms etc.) and whether that has an impact on performance; or whether the schools are offering career guidance services to the marginalized students in the schools in a manner that is effective to open up their aspirations. The research will also bring to the table a localized and modernized viewpoint on whether the high ambitions of education to all and equitable quality education is being achieved in the high schools of Delhi and what it lacks.

Description of the Topic and Research Gap

The general scope of this study is educational equity and inclusion in secondary school level, but in the context of Delhi as a geographical location. In particular, the paper narrows down on educational performance and career choices of two groups of students (1) students in the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), and (2) students in the Socially Disadvantaged Groups (SC, ST, OBC), in high schools in Delhi. These are also one of the SEDGs under priority focus in NEP 2020. Although many studies have been done on access to primary education among these groups (in particular, in the years after RTE), a gap in research can be clearly identified in terms of their advancement to secondary education and transition into higher education or professions, especially in urban environment.

Why Delhi and why high school? Delhi can present an example of the educational inequalities that exist in India: it has a comparatively high per-capita income and government spending on education, however, the inequalities within the city are sharp. Although government records indicate an increase in pass percentages in Class 10 and 12 examinations in Class 10 and 12 in the government schools over the years, disaggregated data (where available) often indicates that the SC and ST students perform poorly as compared to the general category students. In addition, the experiment of the EWS/DG quotas in the private schools of Delhi is also one of the largest in the country, which is why it is a perfect location to look at the results of such inclusion. The stage where the previously existing inequalities are getting wider or even narrow (with the help of interventions) is high school (910). It is also the time when the students begin to identify themselves with career streams (to take science/commerce/arts, etc in Class 11, college entrance test preparation, etc.). Accordingly, analyzing academic performance (grades, exam results) and career goals at this age would give a holistic view of educational equity: grades would show how well the system has helped them to achieve academic success, and career goals would show them how empowered and willing to take up new opportunities in the future.

The fundamental research gap that the study satisfies is that there is no integrative research that links academic outcomes and aspirational outcomes of EWS and marginalized students in an urban environment. Past literature has been inclined to prefer either one of them. As an example, the RTE implementation studies have concentrated on enrolment and academic adjustment, but the sociological studies may converse the career dreams of the youth separately. This research will reveal either that poor academic achievements are linked to a decreased number of goals among the disadvantaged students (the possible presence of an increasing disadvantage), or that some students are still able to have high goals despite their poor academic performance (the possibility of a resilience or unmet supportive needs). It will examine EWS students (mostly of low-income backgrounds of the General category) and SC/ST/OBC students (some of whom might or might not be low-income, but whose social status of marginalization). This is able to tell the differences between economic disadvantage per se and caste based disadvantage. Indicatively, is there any less stigma or even different struggles of do General-category EWS students have compared to, say, an SC student with an equally poor background? These nuances are policy relevant in terms of designing specific interventions.

Objectives of the Study

The research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1) To study the educational performance of socio-economically disadvantaged groups of students in private secondary schools of Delhi.
2) To examine the career aspirations of socio-economically disadvantaged groups of students in private secondary schools of Delhi.
3) To analyse the relationship between educational performance and career aspirations of socio-economically disadvantaged groups of students in private secondary schools of Delhi.
4) To identify socio-economic factors influencing the educational performance and career aspirations of socio-economically disadvantaged groups of students in private secondary schools of Delhi.
5) To identify school-based factors influencing the educational performance and career aspirations of socio-economically disadvantaged groups of students in private secondary schools of Delhi.
6) To suggest measures for enhancing educational outcomes and career guidance for socio-economically disadvantaged groups of students in private secondary schools of Delhi.

Methodology to be Adopted

The methodology to be used in the study will involve a qualitative and case study based approach with a supplement of descriptive quantitative data. The best design that can fit this case is a multiple-case study design, which will enable an in-depth examination of each school situation (as a case) and also compare the different case results to draw general conclusions. This emphasis on qualitative approaches (interviews, observations, etc.) is informed by the necessity of learning about subtler experiences - e.g. sense of inclusion, personal ambitions - that cannot be entirely defined only by numbers. Nevertheless, the analysis of academic performance will also be based on the basic quantitative measures (exam scores, etc.).

Sampling of Schools and Participants: The research will be done in five schools in Delhi that are privately owned (one school will be chosen in five different zones of the city e.g. North, South, East, West and Central Delhi). This zonal selection is quite geographically and socio-culturally diverse - not all of the parts of Delhi are equal in their demographics and school culture. The schools selected will all be of the unaided type of private schools which practice the 25% EWS/DG at entry level (as required by RTE). In every school, we will pick up 20 students in classes 9-10 and they will be either EWS or SC/ST/OBC (or both). The intended sample that will be obtained is approximately 100 students altogether (5 schools x 10 students). Within the sample of each school, we would like to achieve the balance of genders (at least 4-5 girls out of 10, where co-education allows) and the balance of groups (some students enter the school under the EWS income requirements of general category and some under DG quota such as SC or OBC). We will include some student representatives of each of the relevant subgroups (where possible) to represent differences - e.g. 2 SC, 2 OBC, 1 ST, 5 EWS-general (this will be determined by school-specific composition of EWS/DG seats). Alongside students, the secondary respondents will be: their school teachers and counselors (1-2 of each school, particularly the one who works closely with these students such as a class teacher or the teacher in charge with the EWS admissions), and parents of a small group of these students (in order to obtain the parental point of view regarding aspirations and problems). These supplementary interviews will be triangulating and contextual..

Data Collection Methods:

- **Semi-Structured Interviews**: The main data will be obtained through individual interviews with every student of the sample. The interview protocols will include the following: the student academic history and his/her current performance (favorite subjects, any difficulties, any tutoring assistance, etc.), his/her experience in the school (what relationships with classmates and teachers, whether there were any cases of bias or special attention, whether there are any perceived barriers), and his/her future goals or ambitions (what he or she wants to be when she/he becomes an adult, which influences or doesn't influence her/his ambitions, whether there were any perceived setbacks). The interviews will be carried out in a language that the student feels easy talking about (Hindi or English or a combination of both) and are likely to take approximately 45-60 minutes each. Teachers (their observations of EWS/DG students participating, performing and special consideration of them) and school counselors or administration (to know how the school policies addressed to the inclusion, e.g. run induction or remedial programs to these students) will be interviewed as well. The interviews (or focus groups) with a few parents will investigate the family expectations and support at home.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** FGDs can be carried out in each school with 4-6 of the sampled students (where possible, grouped based on similar background to facilitate openness, e.g. an all-EWS group). In other cases, students can present various knowledge in a group, which can lead to memories or identification of norms (e.g., whether they are all subject to a stereotype or not, or how they are supportive of one another).
- **Observation**: The researcher will make non-participant observations in both schools - e.g., by sitting in some class time or during recess/lunch to observe, or by examining the physical notice boards to see any evidence of inclusion practice (scholarship info, celebration of diverse cultures, etc.). Although short, the observations may allow some contextual data regarding the perceived level of integration of the EWS/DG students in the daily school life (i.e. do they freely mix?). Are they receiving equal attention of teachers?).
- **Document/Record Analysis**: To measure academic performance, the research will gather any possible and agreed academic records of each student such as their report cards last year performance in any internal assessment and performance in a board

exam, class 10 or 12 (assuming that they have taken the exams). Such aggregate data as the overall pass rate of the school and any publicly available category-by-category result breakdown (assuming that this is tracked at the school) will also be recorded. Also, formal provisions will be checked on any school documents on EWS/DG policy (such as brochures, circulars, schedules of remedial classes) that may be available..

The application of a variety of techniques (interviews, FGDs, observation, document analysis) will enable triangulation of data which will increase validity of the results. An example would be that a student may state during an interview that they feel completely included, however, when observed may be seen to sit in the quiet corner most of the time, or a teacher may state that all the students are treated equally, and during interviews, the student may reveal that they are treated in certain ways that are subtle, hence the triangulation would help in building up a balanced picture.

Case Study Approach: The five schools will be approached as case studies, with a detailed profile of each school (creation of background, school affiliation, neighborhood context), experiences of EWS/DG students in each school, and dynamics that have been identified in these schools. Within-case analysis will provide knowledge that is specific to that school (e.g., one school could have the best inclusion program and have very positive results, another school may be struggling). A cross-case analysis will follow: a comparison of the patterns of the five cases will be performed to discover similar themes and contrasting results. This might bring to the fore the role that school culture or school leadership can play despite the similarity in the demographics of students.

Analysis of Data: The interviews and FGDs will be audio-recorded (with permission) and transcribed. Thematic analysis will be used in the analysis and will be based on qualitative coding. Our repertoire will begin with some a priori codes (depending on the research questions e.g., academic confidence, teacher support, peer stigma, aspirations - high/medium/low, family influence, policy awareness), but we will use an inductive approach to coding extensively to allow new themes to emerge out of the data. The qualitative data will be coded with the help of the software (NVivo or Atlas.ti) to organize the data. Thematic matrices can further be applied to make comparisons, such as unlike aspiration measures to actual performance of each student or inclusion practices of various schools to their student outcomes. In the quantitative side, the academic grades of the students will be pooled in order to view the performance distribution; simple comparisons (such as average percentage score of EWS with others in the

classroom) will be taken into consideration and where there is, school-level data about the performance of a category may be examined in a descriptive manner. These figures will be utilized to supplement the qualitative results (e.g. in case a student feels that he / she is performing badly because of stress, does his or her actual score indicate a difference in performance?).

Validity and Reliability Measures: There will be a clear audit trail of data (transcripts, notes, code definitions) and potentially a second coder or supervisor to review a sample of transcripts in order to ascertain the coding scheme due to the qualitative nature. Member-checking will be conducted via sharing the summary results or extract transcripts with participants in case of the necessity to assure the correctness of the interpretation. The admitted multi-case design in itself supports the validity by replication logic - when we find that identical themes can be found in all five cases, then our findings become more likely; when not, we research the causes thereof and thus narrow down our findings.

Ethical Concerns: Since this research will deal with minors (ca.14-18 age), there will be the need to observe high ethical standards. The ethics committee of the university will be consulted. The school authorities will be requested to allow conducting research on the premises and accessing records. The parents/guardians of the students will be informed about their consent to participate in the interviews and also to access academic records of the students through informed consent (partly with the consent of the students). Every participant will be guaranteed of his or her confidentiality: the real names of students and their schools will not be used in any of the reports but will be substituted by pseudonyms. Since it is a sensitive issue (students may write about their experiences with discrimination or personal adversities), the interviews will be held in a secure and confidential area within the school, and the participants will be told that they may skip the questions and leave any time. The researcher will also be sensitive to any distress - the researcher will consider any topic that appears distressing, and he or she will either approach it with some sensitivity or discontinue it. Following the data collection stage, in case any serious concerns appear (like a student with mental health problems or a student seriously harassed), the researcher will have a debriefing with the school counselor (in cooperation with the consent of the student) to make sure that the appropriate assistance is provided..

Expected Outcomes of the Research

This study is expected to yield several significant outcomes, contributing knowledge to both academic and policy domains:

- **Mapping of Performance Gaps or Parities**: This is to find out whether there is a measurable performance gap between EWS/SC-ST-OBC and students and their more advantaged counterparts within the sampled schools. Another potential result is the finding of the moderate achievement gap - e.g., EWS/DG students may score lower on average, or experience higher rates of having to repeat a class than the average of the class, mirroring the results on the national level. Instead, there are possibilities that in certain instances of schools EWS/DG students perform equally well as other students (in particular when good support mechanisms are put in place). In the event the results prove that EWS and disadvantaged-group students are persistently performing poorly as compared to the others, then the qualitative data would probably identify factors including lack of access to private tuitions, language differences (when many EWS students are transferred to high schools in English speaking medium) or other psychological elements like lack of self-confidence. Conversely, in case the students with good EWS/DG performance were identified, the research will show what facilitated their success (e.g., parental support, tutoring, or personal resilience and perseverance of the student).
- **Profile of Career Aspirations**: The study will record the spread of the career aspirations of disadvantaged students. There will be a variety of aspirations, some of the students will be driven to higher professions (doctor, engineer, IAS officer) and others to closer or more obvious ones (teacher, police officer, entry to family business, etc.). The other likely conclusion made here is that the aspirational horizons can differ by subgroup: perhaps OBC and EWS-general students (who are not as susceptible to social stigma) will have slightly more or wider ambitions, but some students of the SC/ST group will articulate their fears of entering a profession where they anticipate being discriminated against. However it is also rather feasible that each group equally possesses high dreams but differs on its perceived avenues or self efficacy of the accomplishment. This paper will discuss these nuances. Gendered inclinations in aspirations (e.g., female students may take interest in a narrower range of careers due

to social norms) will also be present, and will be listed as the aspect of the intersectional analysis.

- **Reflections on the Process of School Integration**: Considerations of the Process of School Integration: We believe that the assistance of narratives will allow us to focus on the life of SEDGs students in the private schools. A likely conclusion, according to previous reports, is that a good number of such students feel like strangers or half-breeds in their schools. We can listen to stories such as being bullied because of living in a JJ colony or failing to afford to go on an outing in an expensive school outing - incidents that as the Delhi high court noted hurt the dignity of such students. On the contrary, we can also write about positive experiences - the moments of friendship between classes, or teachers who went out of their way to help an EWS student - that can be used as best practices. Such results will assist to diagnose what schools are doing good and what should be improved in order to make inclusion not a sham.
- **Correlation (or doubt thereof) between Performance and Aspirations**: The study will show trends like: Are the best-performing disadvantaged students also the most aspiring (implicating academic success to drive ambitious goal-setting) by matching our results on academic results with our findings on aspirations. Are there high aspirations with mediocre performance (which means optimism or outside influence), or low aspirations with good performance (which could be caused by the absence of guidance)? To take an example, when we come across a student who performs well and wishes to get a low paying job, this may be an indication that they have self censored their ambitions because of socio cultural conditioning. The identification of these trends will be a valuable consequence as it will inform the extent to which interventions aimed at academic assistance, aspiration-building, or both need to be used.
- **Evaluation of Policy Impact**: It is anticipated that the research will make comments on the effectiveness of existing policies (RTE quota, scholarships, etc.) on the ground in Delhi. Among the anticipated consequences is the detection of gaps in implementation - such as in the event a high percentage of students with EWS claim not having gotten the advertised free textbooks or stigmatization by the manner in which the quota system is administered (e.g. calling out of EWS admissions separately), then it is clear that the policy is not being properly delivered. The other possible result could be the sign of the beneficial effect of some programs: e.g. when a student owes his/her success to a government-funded coaching program or bridge course in school, it confirms such practices. Finally, the analysis will probably find the conclusion that

policies such as the 25 percent reservation have opened the doors (without this, no one of our student participants would be in such schools), but that more must be done to guarantee that the outcomes are equal - a conclusion consistent with the rest of research (e.g., Rampal, 2022) that just putting disadvantaged students in a good school does nothing without constant encouragement.

- **Recommendations and Best Practices**: A set of evidence-based recommendations is an important result that will be recommended, although it is not a finding. Some of the measures that we see to recommend include: academic support (remedial classes, peer tutoring or mentoring programs placing high achieving peers with SEDGs students), teacher and student sensitization (life skills or empathy sessions to decrease the social distance between the various economic groups, in line with NEP emphasis on an inclusive school culture), and stronger career guidance to disadvantaged students (they would be encouraged by connecting them with role models of similar backgrounds who have succeeded professionally). We can also suggest policy considerations to Delhi - such as improved oversight of the school enforcement of the EWS quota (to prevent seats being unoccupied), or even continuing the RTE funding to Class 12 (as at present the funding ceases at Class 8, which is a significant problem since our study will reveal what happens in Class 12-15). These suggestions will be logically based on the recorded experiences - an example of such is in case a recurrent complaint by students is that they find it hard to learn the English language, a suggestion could be to provide intensive English support to SEDGs students at the very beginning.

Proposed Timeline and Work Plan

The research will be carried out over a period of approximately **24 months** (2 years) from the date of synopsis approval, with a tentative schedule as follows:

- **Months 1-3**: Planning and Literature Review. Carry out a comprehensive study of the literature at hand (policy documents, past studies in Delhi/ India) and develop the research tools. In this stage, the official permission will be requested to the education authorities and the target schools in Delhi. The guides to the interview and focus group will be written and tested (possibly on a small sample of students outside the sample) to make sure that the questions are clear and sensitive.

- **Month 4-5**: Rapport Building and Sampling. Complete the choice of the 5 private schools (based on the willingness to participate, the sufficient amount of SEDGs students, the geographic distribution). Make visits to schools to meet with the principals or the coordinators, outline the purpose of the study, and secure the consent. Informal contacts with the potential student participants during these preliminary visits or an orientation session may be organized to create a feeling of comfort and trust. In this period, the necessary consent forms to parents and assent forms to students will be handed out.

  Months 6-10: fieldwork - data collection. Carry out the primary data gathering exercises in all the five learning institutions. The data collection procedure in each respective establishment (interviews, focus group discussion, and observational studies) is expected to take place within a period of about 3-4 weeks and is supposed to be conducted systematically. As an example, it is possible to schedule the following months to School A: Month 6, Month 7 to School B, and so on (with possible overlaps or adjustments based on the academic examination dates and holidays). During this time, the researcher will be willing to interview about 10 students in each institution, 1-2 educators, and any other available parents as per the laid down protocol. At the same time, there will also be observational studies of the classroom or the learning environments. At the end of the data collection in a particular institution initial types of analyses would be carried out to make some modifications in order to proceed to the next institution (an iterative approach to the methodology would be used). It is assumed that the interviews and focus group discussions will be concluded in the Month 10, and the transcripts containing the audio recordings will be compiled.

- **Month 11-13**: Organizing and Transcription of Data. At this stage, all qualitative information that has been captured will be transcribed (where necessary translated into English). The transcripts and the field notes will be carefully analyzed and cleansed. Simultaneously, student records will be gathered in the shape of quantitative data which will be entered into a spreadsheet. This will also involve coding of few first transcripts in order to arrive at a coding scheme. A research assistant could be hired to aid the transcription in case a lot of data has been collected in order to accelerate the work although, directed by a researcher to ensure that no errors are committed.

Months 14-18: Perform a thorough analysis of qualitative data using the assistance of the specified tool or program. It will be accomplished with the help of systematic coding of all the transcripts, identification of significant themes, and identification of relevant quotes. The analysis of case study of each of the educational institutions shall be captured (as case memos). A thematic analysis of cross case will be then carried out to compare and contrast the findings of different schools. The academic data, which will be quantitative in nature, will be analyzed to come up with tables or graphic forms of explaining the performance difference (like a chart of average score of EWS in terms of class average in terms of examination scores in each institution). By the end of this phase, the researcher is expected to have a reasonable understanding of the findings, in addition to embarking on formulating responses to the research question. At the risk of not identifying any patterns, such time may also be devotted to the quick follow-up questions (including quick-communication with an educator to ask her/him to clarify a particular point or confirm a statistic with an educational institution). It is also possible to use this time to make short follow up questions in case of any ambiguous patterns (e.g. a phone call with a teacher to ask about something, or to make a quick fact check with school).

- **Months 19-21**: The First Version of the Dissertation Writing. Prepare the findings of the study in a logical form. Chapters will be Introduction (edited out of synopsis), Methodology (describing the process of working and any deviation) and Results/Findings (this is likely to be in thematic areas with case examples) and Discussion (interpreting results against literature and the reason behind the work). Other table/figure that are required will also be used in the writing by quoting the participants and any other quotation as needed. The real information will be expounded with the anticipated findings which are outlined above. Moreover, the findings of the study will also be used to write recommendations section. Frequent meetings with the supervisor will be maintained during this period to make sure that the analysis and writing are on the right track.
- **Months 22- 24**: Revision, Finalization and Submission. The write-up will be edited in order to gain clarity, coherence and completeness. The supervisor(s) feedback and perhaps a doctoral research committee will be incorporated. This step entails proofreading, citing according to the university guidelines and building a final reference list (in APA style). The plagiarism check / similarity report will be reached to make

sure that the norms of the university are observed. Lastly a short synopsis will be made and a complete thesis will be made ready to be submitted. The Ph.D. program will require an oral presentation or a pre-submission seminar..

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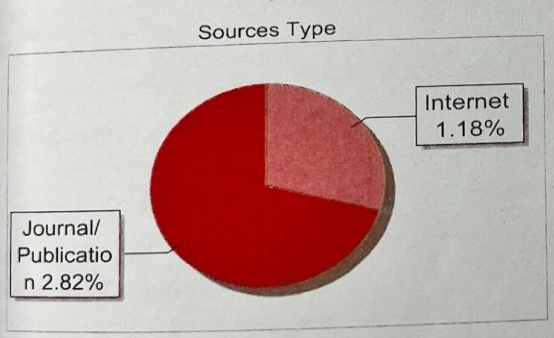

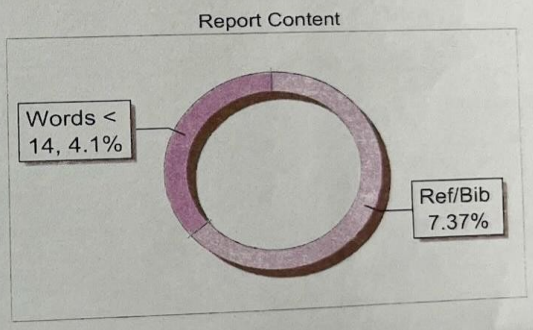

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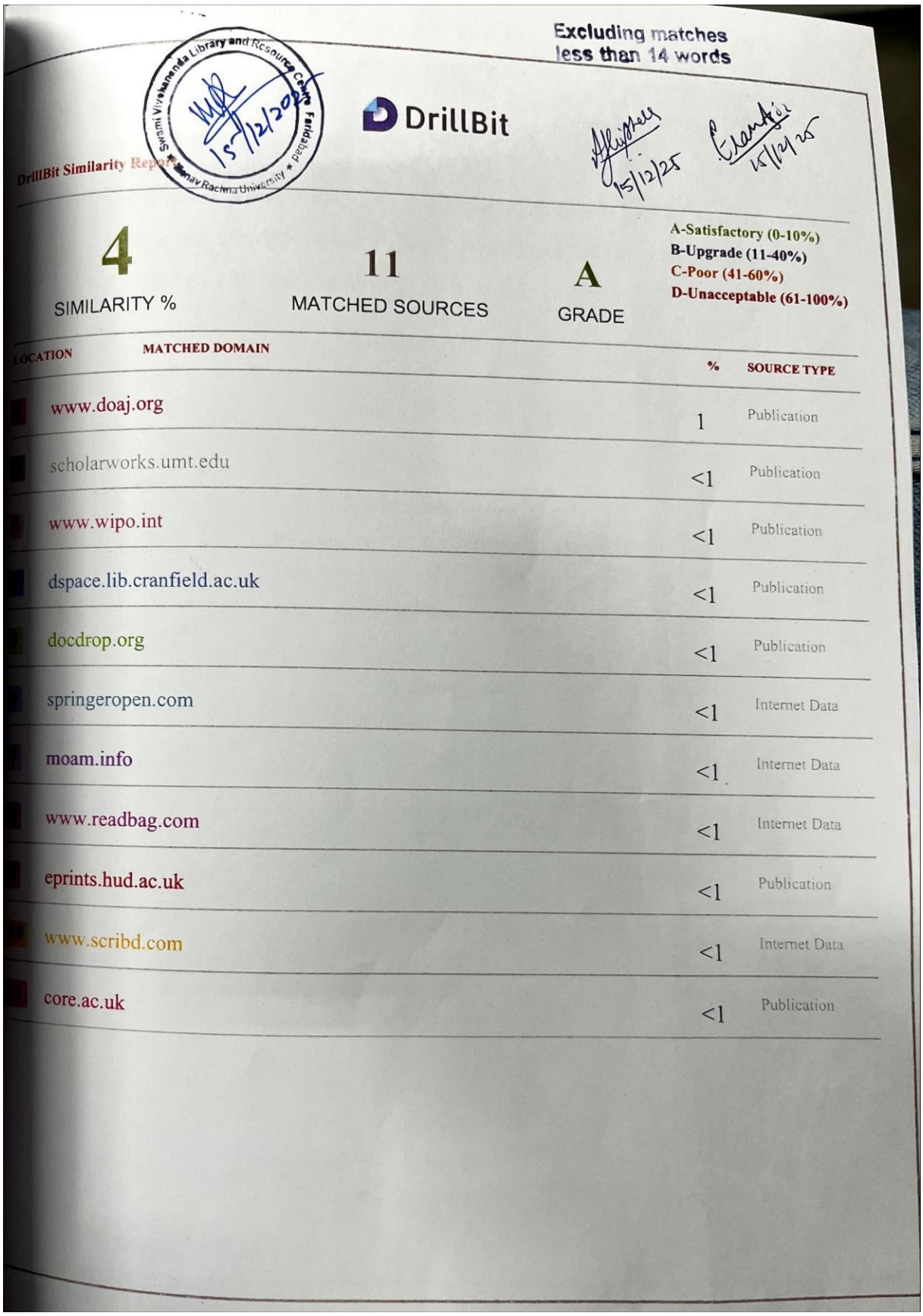

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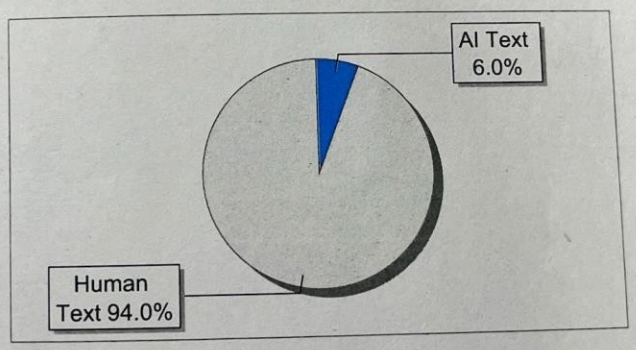

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